

Teens Fill Big Gaps In a Hot Job Market

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FULL TEXT

Teenagers are coming to the rescue of business owners struggling to find enough workers in one of the hottest job markets in decades.

Teens are now working in greater numbers than they have since before the 2008-09 financial crisis, when summer and part-time jobs were a more common rite of passage into adulthood, government statistics show. They have become particularly essential in the retail, tourism and hospitality industries, which many adults left behind during the pandemic.

Unemployment among 16- to 19-year-old workers was at 10.2% in April, shy of the 68-year low of 9.6% it touched last May, according to figures released by the Bureau of Labor Statistics on Friday. Overall, about a third of U.S. teens in that age group are now working, the federal data show.

Many business owners say finding teen hires can be difficult. They are scouting teen job fairs, making schedules more flexible and increasing training to accommodate and entice youthful recruits.

For teens, the current conditions are shaping up to create one of the best summer job markets in years, complete with more options and, in many cases, better pay.

Makayla McDonald, a 17-year-old in Montgomery, Ala., is returning to her lifeguarding job this summer. She first landed it a year ago as part of an effort by the city's mayor to encourage teen work.

"I really like working," said Ms. McDonald, who divides her paychecks between college savings, church contributions, a fund for a loungewear business she hopes to start and spending money to get her hair or nails done. "My mom is a single mom, so I got to see the value of working hard and getting paid for it," she said.

Last summer, Ms. McDonald worked 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. six days a week manning a lifeguard stand in the Alabama heat and reminding swimmers to walk, not run, on the deck. The job had its challenges – frogs from a nearby creek would sometimes find their way into the pool. Still, she bonded with her co-workers and relished the \$10 an hour she earned.

Prepandemic, teen employment had been waning over five decades. Automation eliminated many low-wage jobs, while immigrants assumed others, economists said.

More adults took up certain jobs to make ends meet in the aftermath of the 2008-09 financial crisis, often holding part-time positions that teen workers typically held before, said Alicia Sasser Modestino, a labor economist who studies the youth workforce.

The lives of many teens changed as well. Extracurricular activities, unpaid internships and resume-building volunteer opportunities filled hours that previously might have been spent stocking shelves or scooping ice cream. Ms. McDonald, for example, balances attending one of the country's most rigorous high schools with participating in honor societies, student government, the debate team, the step team, softball and a variety of local volunteer positions.

Early pandemic lockdowns drove teen unemployment to a historic high of 31.9% in April 2020. Now, a tight labor market and rising wages in hourly jobs that teens are more likely to take are creating a jobs bonanza.

"Adult workers said, 'I no longer want this crazy low-wage service job that has a ludicrous schedule, few benefits and rude customers,'" Ms. Modestino said. So "employers suddenly turned to youth."

A summer jobs fair for teens in Arlington, Va., on a recent Saturday drew about 700 attendees, including roughly

100 parents – a more robust crowd than in recent jobs events for adults, organizers said. The event, in person for the first time since 2019, helped teen job seekers connect with 30 employers for positions in retail, hospitality, restaurants, summer camps and water parks.

Itai Ben Eli, a Houston restaurateur, said being someone's first employer comes with extra responsibilities but has been worth the investment. A nearly all-teen staff, which he said he lured with wage increases, made it possible for him to open a European-style bakery, Badolina, last June when he couldn't find the adult workers he needed. He adjusted accordingly, expanding a 10-day training process into a month in which his new young hires shadow more-experienced workers, learn the menu, practice using a point-of-sale system and build confidence speaking with customers.

"We could shape and teach them what is important to us," Mr. Ben Eli said. He has since promoted two of the teens he hired at Badolina to shift leader.

Shira Alatin, who is 17, started working at Badolina last summer when the pandemic upended her typical summer plans, such as an annual family trip to Israel. There, she cycled through different responsibilities – clearing tables, delivering food and preparing coffee drinks. Her parents and older sister all started working young, so a job seemed like a natural way to fill time and earn money, she said.

"I like the interactions," said Ms. Alatin, who kept working at the bakery on weekends when school resumed. This month, she also begins a job as a hostess on weeknights at Hamsa, one of Mr. Ben Eli's other restaurants. "A lot of Israelis come in; I'd speak to them in Hebrew, and they'd be really surprised," she said.

Credit: By Kathryn Dill

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